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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DUSHANBE 001149

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH
PRESIDENTIAL FOREIGN RELATIONS ADVISER RAHMATULLOEV

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Ambassador, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) In an October 14 meeting, Ambassador discussed the content, format, and timing of Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with Presidential Foreign Relations Adviser Erkin Rahmatulloev. He also raised fiscal transparency, Trafficking In Persons (TIP), religious freedom, nuclear security, and bringing Peace Corps to Tajikistan as issues of interest to the United States. Rahmatulloev said Tajikistan would work to better communicate its anti-TIP efforts, might reexamine the law on religion, and wanted to restore its credibility with donors after the IMF misreporting affair. He emphasized that Uzbekistan was the source of Tajikistan's troubles and asked for U.S. support to improve regional relations. End Summary.

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOU - DON'T YOU HATE UZBEKISTAN?

¶2. (C) Rahmatulloev opened the meeting by saying he wanted to give a brief review of the bilateral relationship and then talked extensively about Uzbekistan. Rahmatulloev noted the impact of the economic recession on Tajikistan's finances and the need to scale back government spending and said the GOTI is trying to deal with this situation. However, Uzbekistan created many problems for Tajikistan, and its policy toward Tajikistan is to prevent Tajikistan's economic development. This was illogical, incomprehensible, and damaging to Uzbek interests too. The Uzbeks blocked key shipments of power generating equipment to Tajikistan, and Uzbek claims that Tajik hydropower projects would reduce Uzbek water supplies were totally unfounded. Uzbekistan had increasingly bad relations with all central Asian states because of its "imperial ambitions." Rahmatulloev concluded by saying Uzbekistan violated the rights of its large ethnic Tajik population by suppressing Tajik language education and media.

¶3. (C) To these issues the international community said nothing, Rahmatulloev complained. The United Nations Security Council and the international community should do something about Uzbekistan's behavior; "why do they react to Burma?" but not to Uzbekistan, he asked. Why had the Asian Development Bank delayed financing for the CASA-1000 project to connect Kyrgyz, Tajik and Afghan power systems, but had allotted \$182 million to build the rail line from Khairaton to Mazar e Sharif? Uzbekistan was trying to monopolize all trade with Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution Network, according to Rahmatulloev.

¶4. (C) Ambassador noted that in a recent conversation with the Uzbek ambassador to Tajikistan, the Uzbek ambassador had expressed optimism that problems between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were manageable and could be resolved. Rahmatulloev replied that the Uzbek ambassador probably was referring to the issue of the hydropower station at Khairakum reservoir, which Uzbekistan claimed but which was located in Tajikistan. Rahmatulloev said that the Uzbeks insisted at bilateral commission meetings that if Tajikistan would turn over control of the power station to Uzbekistan, then Uzbekistan would eliminate all the barriers to trade and transit it had imposed on Tajikistan, cancel the requirement for Tajiks to obtain Uzbek visas, remove power transit blockages, restore commercial flights between the countries, and remove landmines on the border. Tajikistan saw no purpose in even having more such meetings with Uzbekistan. Ambassador asked whether such a deal could be carried out in steps, with each side fulfilling parts of the deal in stages as confidence building measures. Rahmatulloev replied that the GOTI was sure the Uzbeks would not follow through on their part of such a deal. With arched eyebrows, Rahmatulloev said, "there is only one way to resolve this problem, and I don't want to say it."

¶5. (C) Rahmatulloev concluded that Tajikistan was counting on the United States to use its influence to encourage regional cooperation; Tajikistan would ensure its hydropower projects did not cause any problems for downstream countries and would in fact benefit them.

¶6. (C) Ambassador said the ABCs would be an opportunity to discuss these and other issues. The ABCs would put people at

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the expert level together to answer questions from both sides and clarify how to move forward on agreed bilateral interests. Ambassador foresaw ABCs organized into four broad categories: Energy, Economic and Political Modernization, Security, and People-to-People Contacts. Tajikistan's ideas on water and energy would be communicated to other regional governments through their ABCs. Rahmatulloev said he agreed with this approach and that the GOTI would decide who on the Tajik side should guide the ABC process.

PEACE CORPS

¶7. (C) Ambassador reminded Rahmatulloev of the Peace Corps issue and that President Rahmon needed to take the next step, a formal request for Peace Corps, in order to move this process forward. Rahmatulloev said that Rahmon had, following Ambassador's presentation of credentials, tasked the Foreign Minister to submit a formal recommendation on this matter soon.

IMF AND FISCAL TRANSPARENCY

¶8. (C) Ambassador commented that the Tajik government had made the right decision to release the results of IMF-mandated audits of Barki Tojik and Talco. Anything the GOTI could do to demonstrate transparency would help to restore its credibility with donors. Rahmatulloev replied that he "confirmed" the GOTI's decision to release the audit results and that Rahmon had ordered "thorough measures" to restore credibility with international financial institutions.

¶9. (C) Ambassador noted that Tajikistan had barely avoided placement in Tier 3 in 2009. He urged the GOTI to be as forthcoming as possible with G/TIP visitors and to convey the steps the GOTI was taking to fight TIP. The USG needed to have an authoritative interlocutor on TIP in the Tajik government. Rahmatulloev said he believed the decline in Tajikistan's TIP rating was the result of "insufficient information." He would be pleased to arrange meetings for G/TIP visitors with agencies dealing with this issue. Rahmatulloev said that President Rahmon had ordered his government to do better at communicating with international parties regarding anti-TIP efforts, demanding to know in a recent meeting why his officials were informing him of anti-TIP measures, but not the foreign parties concerned.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶10. (C) Ambassador raised the prosecution of several members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Khujand, saying that the law on religion was being used to persecute a small group simply for practicing its faith. Rahmatulloev took notes at this point, then said "we are a law-abiding people. But law is not dogma. If there are numerous situations that show the law as negative, then the people's deputies (i.e., parliament) could amend the law. We are ready to work in this direction."

NUCLEAR SECURITY

¶11. (C) Ambassador concluded by asking that the GOTI reexamine nuclear security agreements proposed by the United States but which the GOTI had not signed. He emphasized that assistance could be forthcoming if Tajikistan signed the agreements. Rahmatulloev suggested that the Embassy discuss this in more detail with the Tajik Academy of Sciences.

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¶12. (C) Comment: Rahmatulloev came into the meeting straight from seeing President Rahmon, and Rahmatulloev referred to notes - likely from the President - during his conversation. Rahmon's instructions on what to emphasize to the Ambassador mirrored the President's predominate interests, hence the lengthy diatribe on Uzbekistan, a favorite topic of Rahmon's. We assume that when Rahmatulloev said there is only one (unmentionable) solution to problems with Uzbekistan, he meant that we must wait for President Karimov to pass from the scene.

¶13. (C) Rahmatulloev was ready with answers to our main concerns on ABCs, TIP, Peace Corps, and religious freedom, giving us hope for substantive engagement in the near future on these issues. On religious freedom, his hint that the recent law on religion could be reexamined tracks with comments from a local government-affiliated expert on religion who said that local administrations had received verbal instructions not to enforce the law rigorously because of the opposition to it in the international community. End comment.

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